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Burning the Want Ads

It is a diligent flame, resolute,
that curls these punctual pages
charring the edges,
moving inward in a serious measured march,
incinerating promises of benefits
free parking, paid holidays,
calls for references and resumes.
I sit watching as, last to go,
the dateline blurs, brightens,
vanishes, all my temptations
of convention erased, another week
I will write.

Jung's Motel

Here in the nightstand drawer,
No Gideon's Bible, but
The Golden Bough.
Oh Carl, the curtains
Have mandalas,
The peyote tea is the finest.
In the bathroom,
With its tiled echoes
And metaphoric plumbing,
Our reflections return to us
Mask-like, above a sink
That is the vortex
Of all the mythic rivers
Of the dream world.

A Poet's Wedding Vows

In my ill-prepared, solitary past
I have scribbled poems
on the back of a holy card
of St. Marguerite d'Youville,
on a Canadian five-dollar bill,
and once on a blank page of my passport.
But after today darling
they will all be love poems,
inscribed on fine translucent paper
from the shrub *Daphne papyracea*,
a tenacious plant of the severe Himalayas.
These Nepalese make a paper fine and
smooth to the touch, a tender ivory hue.
I will write upon it only of you.
My words will rise softly to your eyes
from this paper resistant of bugs
and derived from the pulp of a bark
grown on high rocky ledges,
harvest of shrubs that feed on light and stone,
where the air is cold and thin
and only the purest things survive.

Her Last Postcard

The women are not thin here.
Ample and brown,
gold bracelets dimple their arms,
smiles reverberate
across broad beautiful faces.

Yesterday a street vendor said to me
"I would give ten camels for you".
I bought twenty olive-wood rosaries
from that shrewd Muslim.

Remembering our conversation
at the airport,
that little quip about my thighs,
I have decided to stay.

The coffee is so good here, thick and sweet,
held in small thin cups like a treasure.

The Wednesday Night Poetry Society

The Wednesday Night Poetry Society is me.
The kids go up to TV and I sit down with a few cold ones;
unfashionable to admit but that's how it is.
Forget the laundry, let those dishes rot in the sink
or grow whatever. It's invisible. Think of all the sprays
we buy against things we cannot see. Spores, microbes, mites.
These things I put aside. Once or twice I let out the dog,
wait for the sound of her bulk rattling the storm door,
get up, let her back in. Besides that I'm at these keys,
eyes closed, spilling the blood from an ordinary week
and trying to soak it all up on this 20 lb. bond
from the warehouse where likewise I buy the bacon and soap,
all the essential ingredients of sweet imperfect life.

Motor Court Retreat

I am here to write,
aslant on questionable pillows,
propped against the false headboard,
bolted to the wall.
Who would steal this?
There are places in Vermont, little cabins,
leafy paths, quiet coffee shops
for writers bled dry. Not for me.
I need the diesel exhaust of the motor court,
the faucet's drip,
the rank taste of instant coffee
waiting to cut my words on its bitter edge.
A couple murmuring next door, the tense vowels
as they rise and fall.
All I need to work is heat and light,
paper and coffee, bad art on every wall.
Inspiration returns. Now I'm happy.
This is living.

Darla Learns to Say 'Love'

There will come a day you will know
all the useful meanings of that word,
will have caressed it with your lips
and tongue a thousand times besides,
measuring its taste, its sweet
threatening weight and sticky menace.
You will come to use it more with time,
with guilty ease and then like breathing,
the child's game, saying "onion,"
repeating continuously
until it has no meaning.

Eileen

– for Eileen McCarthy-Smith

Where is that poem for you,
who threw me all the books that
floated high enough to save me?

Fifteen, a very bad year.
But there was you, and Maya Angelou
and a book neither of us can name,
that will perch on the tip of my heart
forever—a woman wrenched by pain
and at the end, still standing—
the story you were living, though
I never knew.

You were a lilac dress and eyes to match,
wit, grace, womanhood I never thought I'd master,
telling me: write it down, write it down,
write it all down.

You believed.

Twenty years later I write poems for other people,
ghosts misted over by time,
grasping hands thrust up through false floors.
But you, you are vibrant, still springtime,
my whole life's beacon, the light I write them by.

Teacher,
I cannot write you yet, though every day,
I try.

Barter

I would find their flint points,
a peachy gleam after rain,
each curved chip a token
of the hand that struck fire.

My heart would pound
as they moved in slowly from palmetto scrub,
twisted water oak,
silent as smoke,
squatted on rough brown heels
in white sand,
watching.

You must trade, they would say,
for these things.
The dead of this place:
I would hear their drums
behind me as I ran.

Worm Theology

“Alas and did my Savior bleed, for such a worm as I”

All this slander of worms—
what did they do
to earn this reputation
for moral bankruptcy, what crimes
that Christian hymnody
should so malign them?

Basic, tubular, they are not connivers,
never wasteful, never try a job
they're not suited for.
Little masterpieces of economy;
heartless? Certainly not!
Some have many hearts and,
considerately,
no external genitalia.

Some lay eggs and others break apart
in handy segments,
each with all it needs
to strike out on its own.

It's time to be frank about the worm.
If there ever were a creature all
that God created it to be,
surely friends,
it's he.

The Tree-Climber's Mother, 1964

He wants to know the names of trees
the secrets they whisper to the night
and the soft-voiced things that sip their dew.
She cannot keep him in, cannot dissuade him
from venturing higher, Keds in the barked joints,
toes braced in knotty holes. She waits
for the dreadful shudder
of his dropped weight at the root,
a sound that never comes.
This child is more sure in the trees,
their random freeform limbs,
than on the straight segmented walk that
runs by the drugstore, First Baptist Church
and the bus stop in that small town.
Still he is up in that dizzy oak no father
and no wings and she wonders
are they whispering of her failure
to hold him, grounded,
and what they will do if he falls.

Gusto

It's no wonder I'm profligate, immoderate.
You drank everything: scotch/beer/cocktails of every hue,
sweet or sour, their decadent smells perfumed late afternoons
and laughing dinner-party nights. You smoked everything:
cigars/cigarettes/pipes, round racks of them
on that bulging bookcase by your huge green chair.
You had three tuxedos, eleven tweed jackets
with leather elbow patches: old tobacco/
phone numbers/matches in pockets.
Magazine subscriptions, dozens:
Field and Stream/Atlantic/New Yorker/National Review/
Popular Mechanic/Esquire/Playboy/TV Guide/Gourmet,
the whole world in our mailbox each month
in all its bewildering array.
You loved Shakespeare/Vonnegut/Updike/Cheever—
oddball group for your, old conservative pretender.
You sent me Leaves of Grass/Dylan Thomas/MAD/Gibran,
and all those Booth cartoons
—no wonder I'm conflicted. I remember you:
extravagant, unwise, overflowing with such life,
bulging with it like your middle
straining that Beethoven sweatshirt.
You cooked German/Polish/Spanish/French cuisines,
sometimes all at once,
poisoning my boyfriends with this exotica,
till they lay on the dock belching at the stars.

Daddy, it's no wonder I'm fat
and a poet.

Re-incarnate

When you kill yourself
no one wants to talk to you
anymore.

Even if you come back
you are such
an embarrassment.

The problem, in fact, is that
you DO come back,
you just keep getting thrown back
to the same sorry place you left,
or a worse one.

Not in a romantic way,
like a shell washing back to shore,
but like the shoes that keep getting left
on the same damn stair
for someone to trip on;
like the same stupid dog
comes back to piss on your forsythia
over and over again.

It is not a comfort, this returning.
It does not bring joy to the hearts
of those you left behind.

They don't know who the hell you are
when at last you make your way
to your old front porch

where they swat at you,
cursing,
"would you close that damn screen door,
keep those little bastards outside
where they belong?"

Terminus

Give me
an antique
cause of death
overcome
by dark humours
frightened to death
by succubi
in the snuff
of a candle.
No specialists
Latin names
no well-lit place
to do it in.
Let there be
mystery
something
worth children
lying awake at night
my obituary
will say
she was led
into the horsepond
by a will o' the wisp
exposed to dark air
mad drunk
on moonlight
levitated
by spirits
to the clocktower
then
let go.

Baby's First Bath

The dead infant
is scalded white and scarlet
a horrible piebald fish.

Beside me at counsel table,
the gentle social worker who found him
the cop on the stand
who took the picture,
breaking down.

Do you need a moment officer?
No, I'll go on. I can go on.

No inept parent's failure caused this
though I'm sure the careful warnings
were a helpful guide
to what was done so awfully well.

There is enough ugliness you will live to see
without my putting this dead baby
in your head.

Forgive me.
He cried so much in my sleep
I thought he needed more people
to hear him.

To a Nameless Child

We will not let earth touch you
death-dirt sift into your eyes
or fill your questing mouth
with the dense grainy answer
of soil.

We'll roof you over
with cherrywood
vault you, seal you up
against the tide of sand.

Like the small tight boat
of reed and pitch
set gently on the Nile,

We'll send you down untouched
in this excellent vessel
to the rich fine palace
of forever.

Wax

After the hearing
After sifting the detritus of violence and dysfunction
I am in my car
I turn on the radio
I take off my shoes
I roll the windows open to everything
Which is unlike that which dominated my morning.
My heart is hungry for the world
Beyond this little community playhouse of pathos
Where we act out monotonously sad
Yet hideously various dramas
"In re: Girl X," "In re: Boy X,"
In all their sorry splendor and array.
I am not complaining.
I have chosen this domain
The public dumpster of the judicial system,
Other people's mess,
Which seems to stick to me on days like these,
Makes me want to turn myself inside out
And stand out in the rain.

These afternoons I wax the floor.

How can I explain the mystical healing effect
Of this practice somehow restorative of faith and sanity
Conjuring the essence of all that is good, dignified and noble
The purifying herbal smell of carnauba wax and lemon oil
Transporting me
To small New England libraries with dark wood shelves
Worn leather chairs, old books with covers like saddlery,
The smell of deep and holy quiet.
To graceful echoing churches
Where I have seen worn arthritic women run soft rags
Over altar and pew, floor and rail
In the attitude of reverent pilgrims
Praying Stations of the Cross,
Wisps of white hair straggling from under kerchiefs,
Clumsily hidden halos.

There are people who do not scream,
Who do not spit and accuse,

Lie and scratch and burn and tear at the
Tender flesh of babies,
Fail to feed them, break their bones
Sell their small doomed bodies for drugs
Slake with them their rage and fevered hungers.

I will summon them now,
The people who write the books,
Those fine aged works
Of noble sensibility
Of great and ordered thought.
Those strong and humble women who caress the smooth
wood,
Light the candles,
Who turn for one last look
Cross themselves, touching knee to floor,
Though no one is there to see.
I run these thoughts around in my mind like a cool white
pebble.
I close my eyes and breathe in the knowledge
Of heroism and selflessness in people.
I believe in the Communion of Saints.

I will sit like this for a long time,
Rubbing the long oak boards
Till they softly shine
Till they glow like blessed candles
In the empty church.
In an hour my own children will come
Down from the school bus steps
Across the sweet green lawn
My own children safe and well
My own children fed and whole
And we will embrace,
And we will embrace.

Orientation

Your first adjustment will be hardest,
the wild spinning.

Brightness is easier, though shocking-
and breathing air-

but this movement
even in the container
that keeps you from exploding
back into light,

eve with this pump
that exerts a constant argument
against gravity . . .

even with these things, you'll feel it
the vertiginous swirl of all of it
the surging of things,
massive rhythmic advance of sea
shrugs that heave mountains
out of shale plain.

Every one of us is overwhelmed by this at first.
Cry about it all you need to.

You will make your surefooted way in time,
a sailor on a rolling ship.
You will forget.

Can you trust me, stranger?
Listen:
one day you will attune to this mad dance;
one day
nothing will seem to move at all
but the rivers
and the wind
and your own wild heart
as you run.

Showing Up

– for Dr. Thom Frye

These children have plowed up my heart
with their pain,
they have furrowed the dark earth there
and scattered tears.
What flowers grow from such anguished seed?
Only hope, stubbornest weed of all.
Why be an explorer of this strange land,
the shifting ruins of the mind?
Who do I think I am, after all?
The photographer
crouched behind the climbing rose
catching silver moments
in a black box,
the wanderer
listening unashamedly
at the broken windows
of the heart,
a grief merchant, wandering
the misty and uneven streets
hawking “tears to cry, tears to cry
tears to cry,” limping
to my bare room by the sea.
Other days, through their
wounded eyes, lost eyes,
deadened eyes,
a gate opens to a world
beyond the self, and I walk through,
a ramshackle king in a land
of indiscriminate nightmares.
I name the monsters, and they crumble
into dust.
Maybe one child will have one hour
of peace, one night
of untroubled dreams.
Notice how in every sacred scripture
of this shattered world
the angels speak these words:
“do not fear.”
This, then, is what I will be.

It will do, to be a wounded man.
It will do, to be a flawed and searching man.
All the angels are,
and I can say, if nothing else,
into the howling night that would devour:
Do not fear.
You are not
alone.

I am here.

Postcard from Earth

Kind host
do not think me ungrateful
but it was warmer here once
the seasons gentler
the beds more softly made.
Now the dimming light,
the chill
the gloomy silence
make me think
that you are on a journey
perhaps never to return.
Much here is in need
of your good guidance.
I grow weary of solitude,
of dining alone—
bland, uninteresting fare
one candle, flickering.

Death of the Old Dog

It is time for the old dog to slip down
beneath the grass, to taste the sharp iron
of earth on her broad lolling tongue,
to yield the sap of her eyes to the blind worm
and her thick brown pelt to the cold roots
of the twisted Northern Spy behind the barn.
Her deep moans will shudder in its branches
with the wind that rattles the storm door
as she once did, let me in
to my coiled rag rug by the fire,
let me in.

She lies down there to be sipped up by the dewy grasses
to be swept, a colored dust-cloud,
painting the high sweep of canyon wind,
to be dropped from a hawk's lizardy talons
becoming hawk, wind and all,
the clear substance that they swim in,
the slow honey amber of memory and light.

